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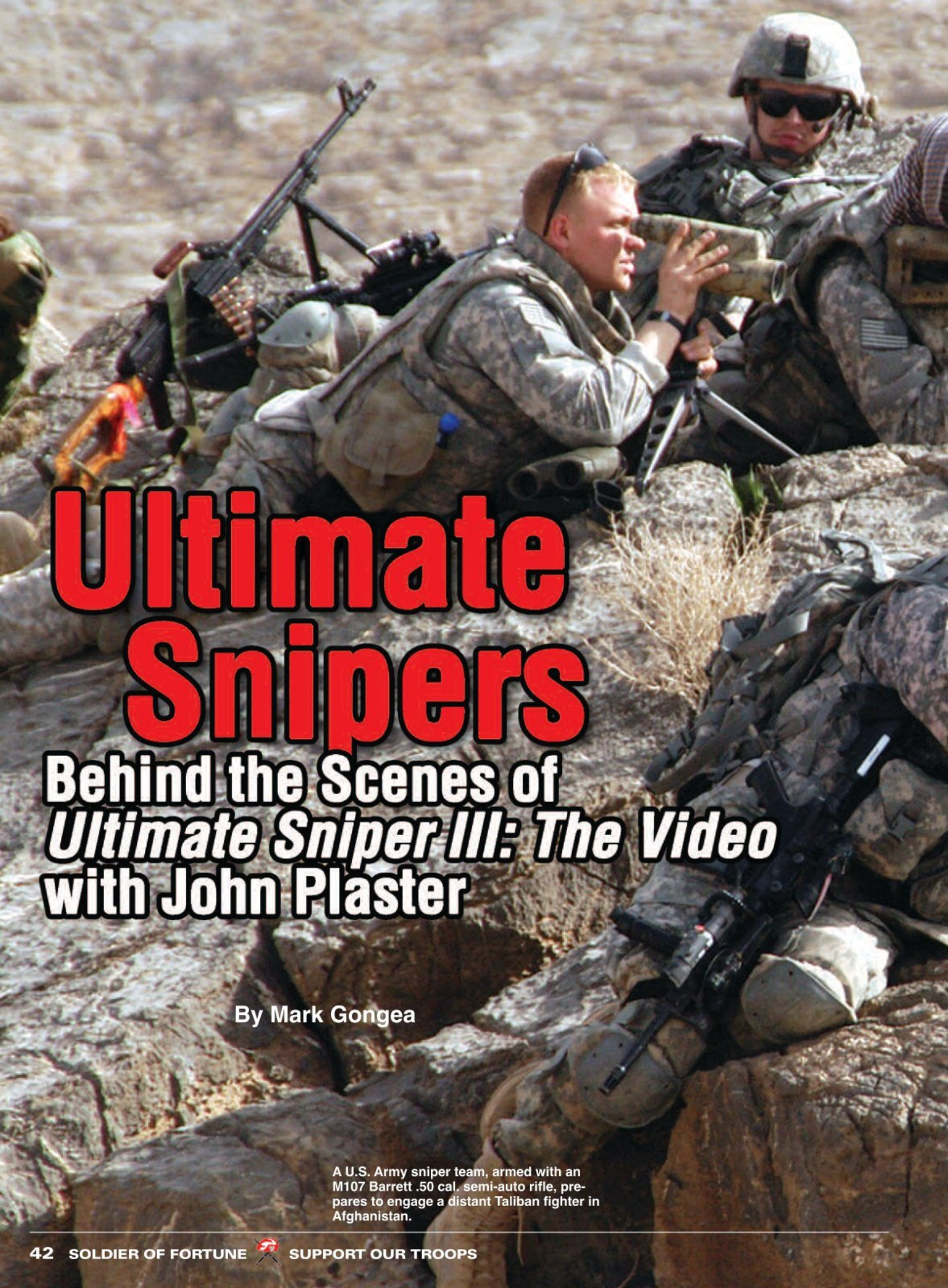
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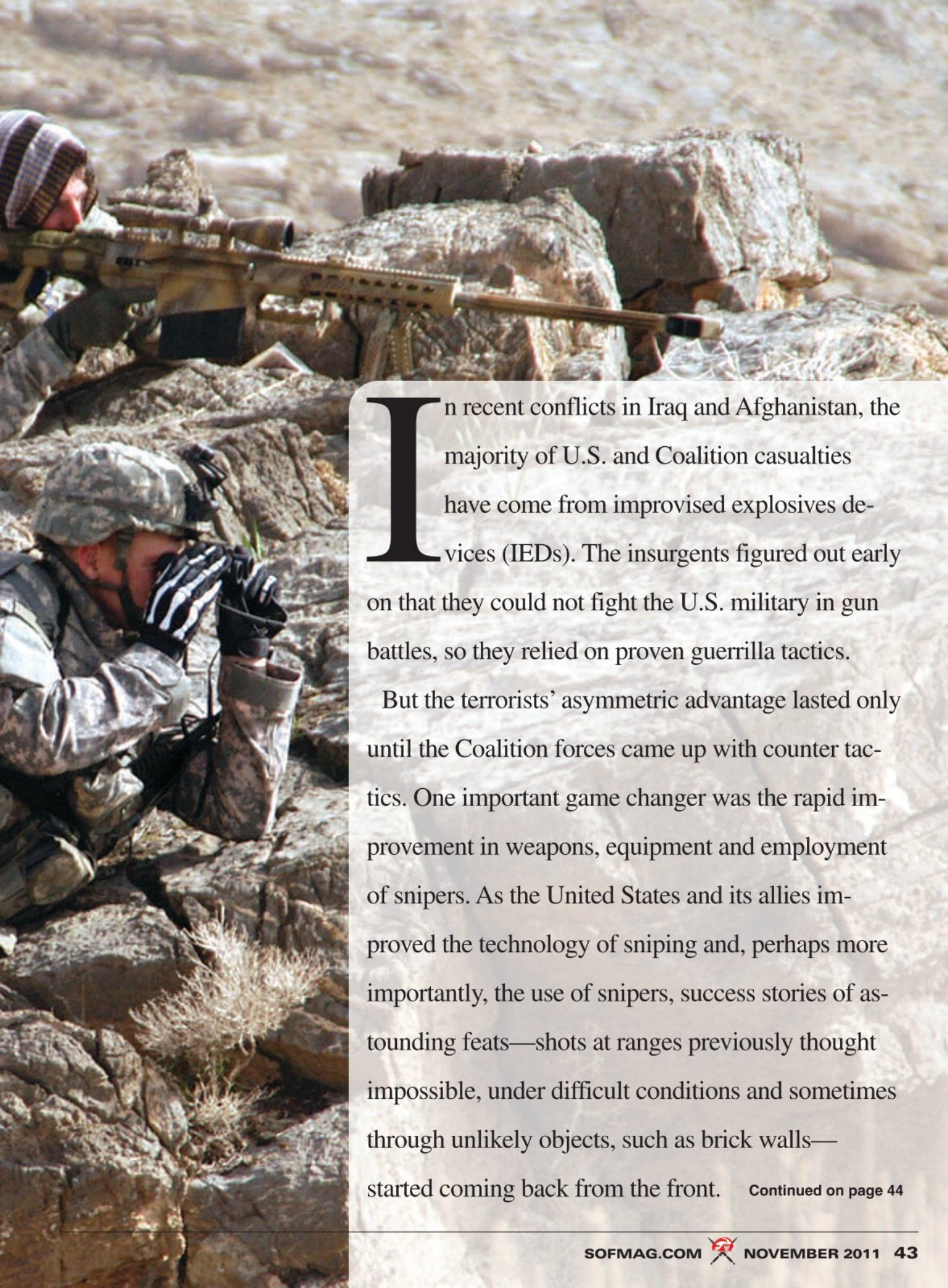


Ultimate Snipers

Behind the Scenes of
Ultimate Sniper III: The Video
with John Plaster

By Mark Gongea

A U.S. Army sniper team, armed with an M107 Barrett .50 cal. semi-auto rifle, prepares to engage a distant Taliban fighter in Afghanistan.



In recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the majority of U.S. and Coalition casualties have come from improvised explosives devices (IEDs). The insurgents figured out early on that they could not fight the U.S. military in gun battles, so they relied on proven guerrilla tactics.

But the terrorists' asymmetric advantage lasted only until the Coalition forces came up with counter tactics. One important game changer was the rapid improvement in weapons, equipment and employment of snipers. As the United States and its allies improved the technology of sniping and, perhaps more importantly, the use of snipers, success stories of astounding feats—shots at ranges previously thought impossible, under difficult conditions and sometimes through unlikely objects, such as brick walls—started coming back from the front. Continued on page 44



Former Canadian sniper Robert Furlong takes aim with a Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle. In 2002 he set a world record for a .50-cal. kill, dropping a Taliban leader at 2700 yards in Afghanistan.

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In 1993, Paladin advanced the training of snipers with the publication of *The Ultimate Sniper* by Major John Plaster (revised and updated in 2006). That book was followed by two *Ultimate Sniper* videos, the last one released in 1996. In view of developments on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, it was clearly time to take another look at snipers, their weapons, their technology, and their employment.

There could be no better person to take on this task than John Plaster, the author of the *Ultimate Sniper* books and videos and Special Forces combat veteran. To help him with this modern update on today's snipers, Plaster enlisted the help of Canadian Robert Furlong, who holds the world record at more than 2,700 yards for a confirmed kill with a .50 caliber rifle; U.S. Army First Sergeant James Gilliland, who holds the record for the longest conventional sniper rifle kill in Iraq; and former U.S. Marine sniper Steve Reichert, who achieved the longest .50 caliber kill in Iraq and famously fired through a brick

wall to eliminate a machine gun team endangering his Marine company.

Whenever you have the opportunity to be around the top people in any field for even a brief moment, you are indeed fortunate. I had the chance to spend several days watching and listening to the premier instructor of snipers and three of the top snipers in the world demonstrate the state of today's art of sniping. The *Ultimate Sniper III* video shoot promised to be a revealing look into this world.

...

Spring usually arrives late in northern Wisconsin, but this year it had been exceptionally tardy. When the Paladin video crew arrived in early June to film the third installment in the *Ultimate Sniper* video series in Iron River, Wisconsin—the home of Major John Plaster—the snows from early May had barely melted away. The lingering cool temperatures and moisture had left the area green and lush and perfect for shooting a sniping video.

The Paladin crew consisted of publisher Peder Lund, video director Matt Doyle, cameraman Brad Efting, and me,

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a freelance video editor from Canada, who was participating in my first Paladin video shoot. We arrived on Thursday afternoon and were scheduled to meet Steve Reichert at the airport in Duluth, Minnesota, for the 54-mile drive to Iron River. At the airport we learned that Reichert's flight into Duluth had been delayed and he would not be arriving until very late that night. So we drove to Iron River, confident that the Marine sniper could find his way to town. Neither Doyle nor I had met John Plaster before, and we were curious about Paladin's best-selling author. The first thing we learned about the retired U.S. Army major who spent three tours in Vietnam with MACV-SOG was that he doesn't waste time with casual talk.

RECONNAISSANCE

"Let's go and check all the locations," he told us as soon as the introductions were completed. "Here are a list, a map, satellite snapshots, and characteristics of each place," he announced, as he passed out copies of his files to each of us. We were all impressed by Plaster's preparations. He had delivered the detailed out-

line weeks ago, and the handout included maps, list of locations with all data we'd ever need, satellite pictures with measurements, a summary script for each scene, plus detailed descriptions of locations and instructors.

"Great," I thought to myself, "we just have to set up the gear and push the record button." That turned out to be not quite true.

"We're going to use my truck," Plaster instructed. "It's better to ride together so we can talk about the shoot."

All five of us crammed into the SUV and were soon



Rob Furlong with a McMillan TAC-50, similar to the TAC-50 he used to execute the 2,430 meter (2,657 yards) shot in Afghanistan during Operation Anaconda in March 2002.

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racing to the first location, the “241” point, as Plaster had named it on his hand-drawn map. During the 10-mile drive, deep in the Chequamegon National Forest, we had time to admire the wildness of this place. There were only woods as far as the eye could see.

“We are in Bayfield County—20,000 people and not a single stoplight in the whole county,” Plaster told us as he pulled over on the side road. “This is 241, where we’re going to fire in extreme-range conditions, over 1,000 yards.”

Everything around was charred, the aftermath of a massive fire. “It was a controlled burn,” Plaster explained as we looked around at the terrain, made a few notes about staging shots, and asked a few questions before heading out for the next location, “Wyoming,” he called it.

“The most important objective for this shoot is to find safe locations,

where we can send rounds at long distance. I personally selected all of them. I got lucky with my friends; a lot of people were offering their help to make this video a success,” offered Plaster.

In the next hour, we saw the last two locations, “1800” and “The Sheriff’s,” plus two backup locations in case of bad weather. All were perfect.

“READY, AIM, SHOOT!”

After a very successful first day, we were eagerly looking forward to Friday, when we would meet the three decorated combat snipers. Day two started with a strong handshake delivered by a very strong Marine. Steve Reichert had arrived late in the night, driving from Minneapolis, but he appeared rested and ready to start filming.

We loaded up and headed to “1800” for the first scenes to be shot with Reichert. As Steve was getting his sniper rifle ready, John Plaster took snap shots with a Savage TRR-SR .17 cal Hornady Magnum Rimfire rifle, and explained the unexpected choice of rifle and ammo.

“This ammo is not expensive, but it is high quality, perfect for snap-shooting and positional shooting, where a lot of expensive match-grade ammo could be consumed. Use a rim-fire to get the desired results

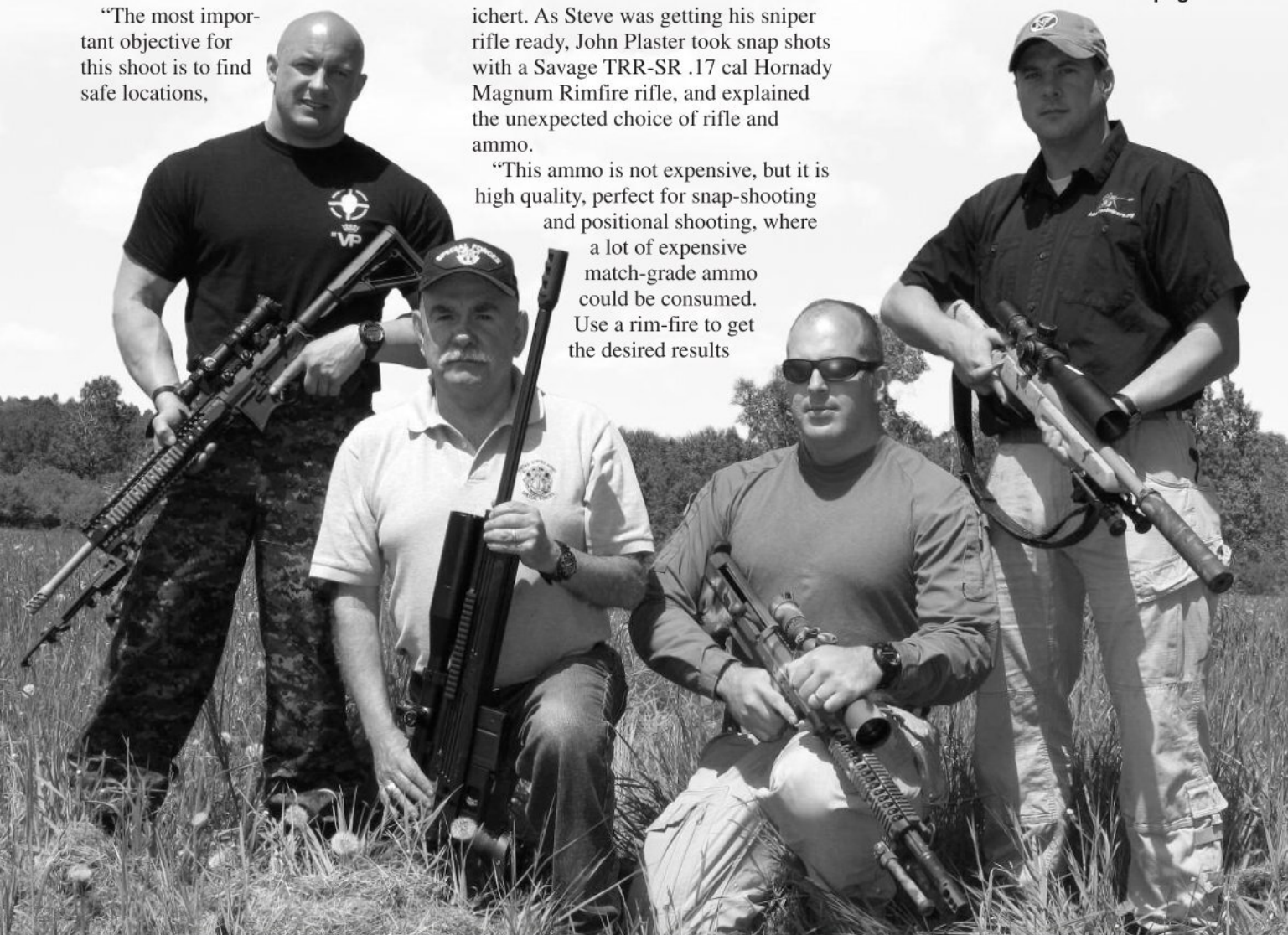
before you start training with a combat rifle.”

Though he is only 31, Reichert has a long history as a sniper. It started when he was in the sixth grade and bought John Plaster’s *Ultimate Sniper* book from Paladin Press and read it cover to cover, over and over. Hiding in a tree house, he would pretend that he was a Marine sniper in combat and use the book’s information to decide what to do in various scenarios.

“Soon after that,” Reichert said, “I bought the *Ultimate Sniper* video with all the money I could save from my chores, especially shoveling snow. It was at that time I decided what path I would follow: join the Marines and become a sniper.”

Later that afternoon, Jim Gilliland and Rob Furlong joined us, and the discus-

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The new Paladin Press instructional DVD features four world-class snipers: (L-R), Canadian world record .50 cal. shooter, Robert Furlong; U.S. Army Special Forces SOG combat veteran, John L. Plaster; the USMC sniper with the longest recorded kill in Iraq, Steven Reichert; and U.S. Army Airborne Ranger sniper, Jim Gilliland, who achieved the longest 7.62 mm kill in Iraq.



sion among the snipers soon turned to the differences between professional soldiers and insurgents.

"The enemy soldiers have no morality, no ethic. They have never heard of Geneva Conventions, and even if they had, they will never comply with its content," remarked Reichert of his observations from Iraq.

Gilliland, who was an instructor at the U.S. Army Sniper School and whose "Shadow Sniper Team" was credited in a *USA Today* article with more than 200 kills, shared two of his combat stories to illustrate how the enemy isn't bound by the same rules as Western forces.

"They can operate in mosques, churches, and hospitals, and we can't really go in there. They can even dress up as women. Late one afternoon in Ramadi, one of the shooters and I were observing an area, and we noticed a woman dressed in a complete burqa come out of a side street and very near to a known IED location. Her movements were very erratic, a lot of looking around, and she just did not fit in. Basically, she was out a lot later than we were used to women being out. So we watched this individual for about 20 minutes until she turned and walked back into the alleyway. The two of us talked back and forth, and Harry and I decided this was something we really needed to pay attention to. Then the individual came back out, looked around a time or two, and then immediately

bent over where the IED hole was and started brushing material out of the way.

"That gave us what we needed to positively identify hostile intent. So I got on the spotter scope, and Harry jumped on the rifle and with a 700-yard one-round

the spotting scope and looked down at the body. The burqa face cover had flipped up, and underneath was a large Wahabbi (fundamentalist) beard. It was actually a man who had come in and started digging a hole with the intention of planting an IED.

"Another time," Gilliland continued, "we had an individual, a male, who had been shooting at one of our patrols, put a child, four or five years old, on his shoulders to give him a piggyback ride. But the man was still walking around with his weapon, thinking that no one would engage him because of the child. Fortunately for the troops who were on the ground, we had a sniper team right there. It was a 200-meter shot, very low risk, so we put three rapid rounds into the individual to take him out. The child ran off unharmed.

"These two scenarios we just talked about give you an idea of what you might see on today's battlefields. You are not going to fight against a uniformed individual; you are not going to fight against a soldier or a warrior. You are going to fight an indigenous person using the things they have and know, and they are willing to do anything to win."

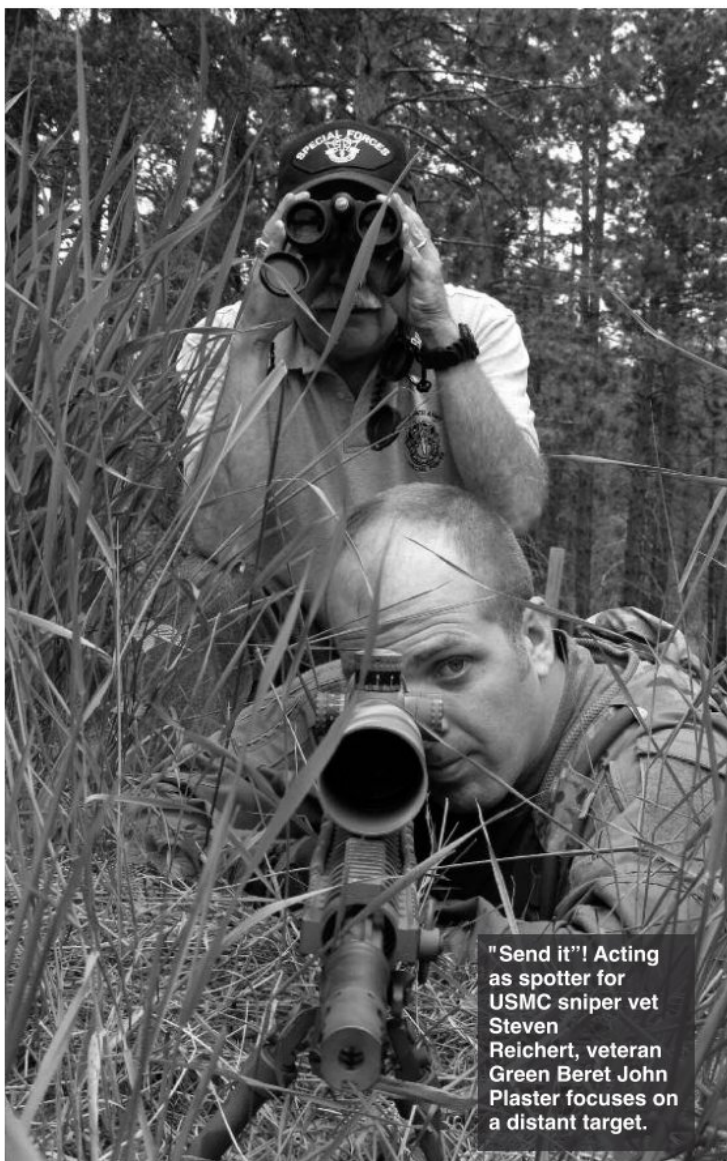
Gilliland holds the record for the longest sniper kill recorded for a 7.62mm rifle in Iraq, shooting into the fourth floor of a hospital in

Ramadi at 1,250 meters to eliminate an enemy sniper who'd just killed an American. He took this difficult shot with the scope's turret set for maximum elevation and with the scope's mil dot reticle held over an additional 2 mils, or approximately 12 feet of "Kentucky windage."

"It was a one-in-a-million shot that I do not expect to be able to duplicate," added Gilliland modestly.

EXTREME RANGE FIRING

On our second day of shooting we moved to "241," where we would be



kill laid this individual over. We were very nervous about this kill because we didn't know what the reaction was going to be since the target was a woman. The two of us talked it over and spent the night doing some reports to preempt what was might happen.

"The next morning when the sun started coming up, we both noticed that the woman was still lying there, which was absolutely not normal. Usually the bodies were policed up during the night and as a general rule buried before the sun came up the next day. But this individual was still out there. I got back on

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filming heavy rifle live fire at extreme range. We noted that it was cooler than the previous day, but temperature was of little concern to the snipers.

"The wind is a sniper's biggest challenge," Plaster explained. "A wind gauge only tells you the wind where you are; it cannot tell how the wind is behaving where your target is, and it cannot give you an estimate for the wind along the projected trajectory of the bullet. You cannot predict the wind's direction and velocity unless you see its effect on trees or other natural elements."

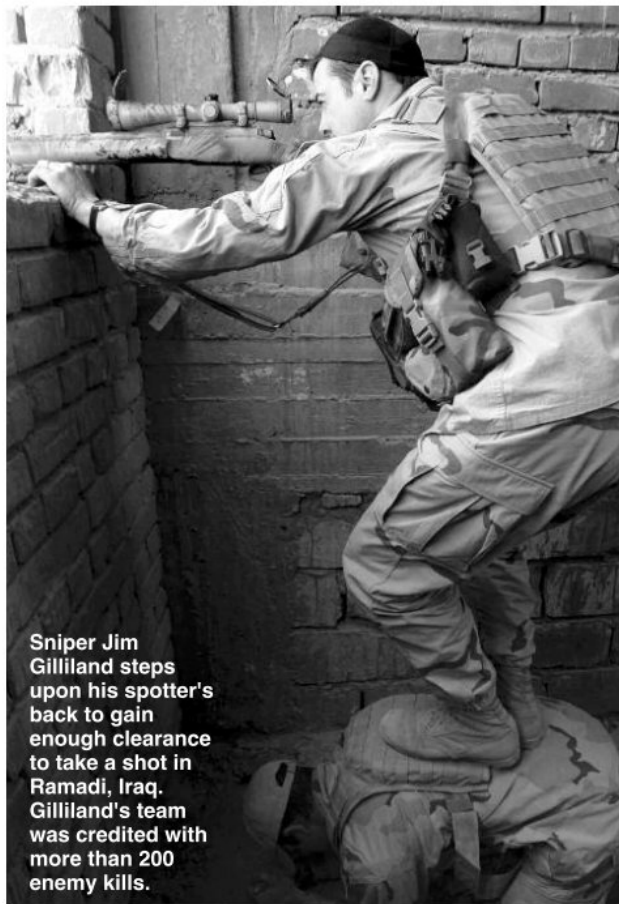
Reichert elaborated. "Snipers these days carry a lot of technology with them. In the past you might have had a thermometer, a compass, your data sheet and log book, and that would allow you to make an educated decision on a firing solution with what you had in front of you. Today, shooters have a weather station that will give barometric pressure, temperature, and wind speed. That's great, but it's what you do with the information that counts, and that's where PDAs [personal digital assistants] come into play.

"I can plug all the environmental data into the PDA to produce a firing solution that will get me a lot closer to the target on that first round. When you are shooting at extreme distance, figuring out the trajectory isn't necessarily the hard part—figuring out the wind is. With a PDA you can enter multiple winds in different zones. If I have a wind going one way here and a wind 500 meters away going a different way—wind going in different directions all the way to the target—I can plug those into the PDA to get a firing solution to get the first round on target with a lot greater efficiency and accuracy."

Reichert assembled his .50-caliber rifle, an impressive M107 Barrett, which was being used for the first rounds at more than 1,000 yards. The ammunition

was Hornady AMAX .50 BMG match with a 1.050 ballistic coefficient and premium propellants. Rob Furlong would be assisting Reichert.

Furlong explained his role. "When shooting at extreme range, it is very important to have a good spotter. The spot-



Sniper Jim Gilliland steps upon his spotter's back to gain enough clearance to take a shot in Ramadi, Iraq. Gilliland's team was credited with more than 200 enemy kills.

ter will look through his scope and will watch the arc of bullet trajectory as it transits mirage or rippling heat waves. The bullet makes a 'swirl,' and that is what a spotter carefully observes. He can also see how and where the wind will change the trajectory, the wind intensity and direction, and therefore he will be able to make corrections and assist the sniper in making the adjustments. The best spotter is a former sniper, with years of experience in watching the bullet in the air."

"How can you see that swirl, Rob? How does it look?" someone asked.

Rob smiled. "It is like in the *Matrix* movie. Remember when everything is in slow motion and you can see trajectory of the bullet in the air? Also, another important element to consider is the 'splash' the bullet makes when it hits either the ground or another surface."

The cameraman set one of the cam-

eras, which was positioned close to the target, to record and then backed away to a safe distance. We were around some of the most precise shooters in the world, but we were dealing with deadly rounds so all safety precautions were observed.

Furlong looked over the valley to the target. "In extreme-range shooting, it is too far to estimate by eyesight. I'm curious to see how it is going to be here in the valley. The wind is going to be challenging, as always."

From his prone position, Reichert interjected: "At extreme range, your aim is to put enough rounds out there that you're bound to hit something."

The .50 caliber slammed into Reichert's shoulder, and the bullet travelled the 1,000 yards, its swirl and splash relaying precious information to his spotter, Furlong.

"Two mil on vertical, 1 mil right, Steve."

"OK, Rob, ready to fire!"

"Send it!"

"Windage is good, 1 mil down."

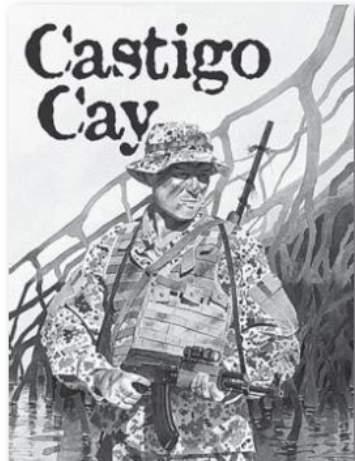
"Up!"

"Send it!"

Another bullet swirled through the air.

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This time, Rob watched the impact with the steel target.

"Hit!"

Lying nearby behind a Savage .338 Lapua Magnum equipped with a Millet LRS 6-25x56 scope, John Plaster placed a first-round hit into a target at 744 yards. Adjusting his scope, Plaster repeated that at 1000 yards with another first-round hit. Then, firing the same rifle, Furlong cranked up the elevation and hit another steel target, well beyond 1,000 yards. That was less than half the distance of his longest confirmed sniper kill in Afghanistan (2,700 yards), which remains the world record .50 caliber shot. In 2009, a British soldier, Corporal Craig Harrison, exceeded Furlong's shot by a mere 100 feet—but that was with a .338 Lapua Magnum, not a .50 caliber.

While waiting to fire, Furlong told us about his confirmed kill in the rugged mountain terrain of Afghanistan in March 2002, while he was attached to a U.S. Special Forces team.

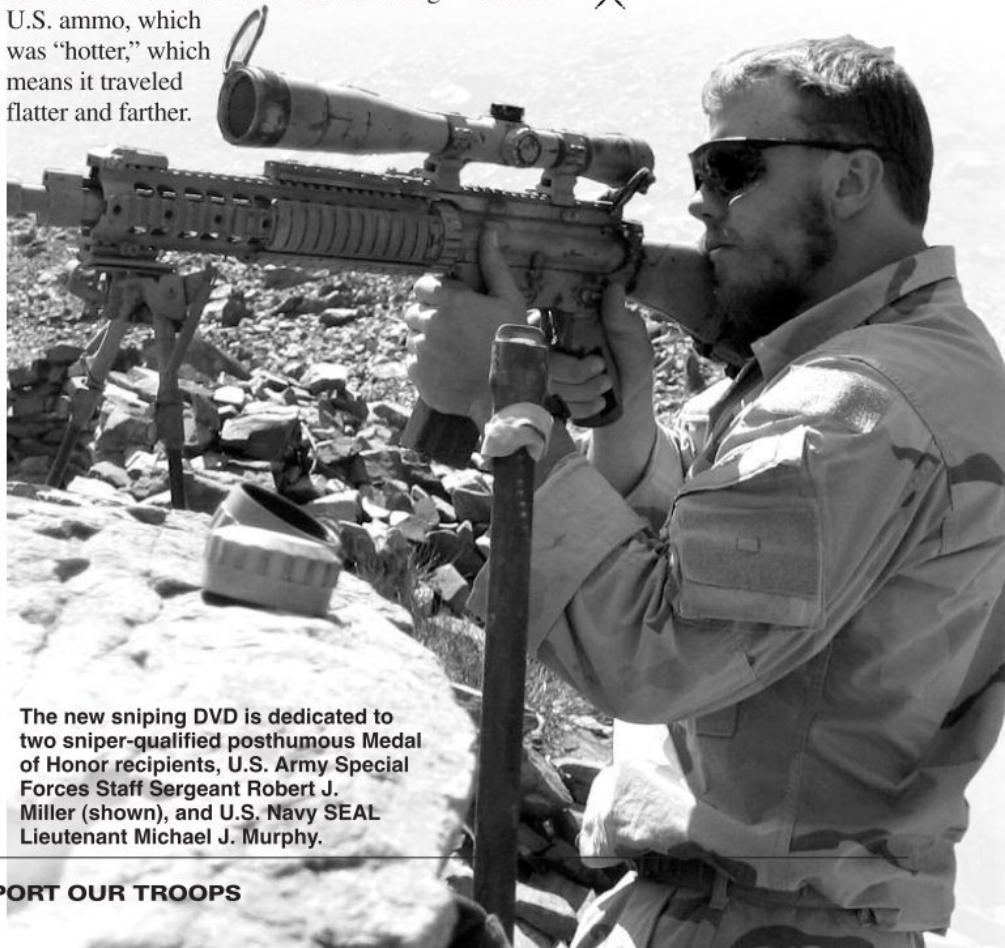
"A group of three al-Qaeda fighters were moving into a mountainside position in Shah-i-Kot valley at about 9,000 feet above sea level. They were walking, maybe thinking it was their lucky day, but . . . it wasn't," he emphasized.

Furlong described the conditions that surrounded his shot. Previously, he had run out of Canadian ammo and was firing U.S. ammo, which was "hotter," which means it traveled flatter and farther.

Approximately 1 1/2 miles (2,700 yards) away, he knew that his long-range sniper weapon (LRSW), a .50-caliber McMillan TAC-50 long-range sniper rifle and ammunition loaded with 750-grain Hornady A-MAX very-low-drag bullets, had a maximum effective range of 2,190 yards. Taking advantage of an old sniper trick, Furlong laid out his ammo in the sun to warm it, hoping to coax even more distance from the rounds.

Furlong also had to adjust for elevation drop, as well as the three crosswinds swirling at the time. "I was maxed out on both elevation drop and windage," he remembered, "so I halved the scope and led the target four mils for windage and four mils for elevation. I took aim at a Taliban fighter carrying an RPK machine gun. The first round missed the target; the second hit the knapsack on his back; the third struck the target's torso, killing him."

With a muzzle speed of 823 m/s (2,700 feet per second), each shot reached the target approximately four seconds after being fired. "A .50 round is devastating. If a .50-caliber round hits you, you're not going to live to tell about it. I knew I hit him, and that was part of my job, to eliminate the enemy threat," Rob concluded and assumed his position to fire the first round for the camera. 



The new sniping DVD is dedicated to two sniper-qualified posthumous Medal of Honor recipients, U.S. Army Special Forces Staff Sergeant Robert J. Miller (shown), and U.S. Navy SEAL Lieutenant Michael J. Murphy.